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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging that basic skills instructors must deal with the affective characteristics of developmental students, this paper describes factors to consider for creating an environment in which developmental students can improve their learning skills. The first section of the paper discusses ways to meet emotional needs when planning a pretest for assessing language skills. The next section lists other tests that can be useful for assessing and meeting affective needs, such as writing apprehension assessments, assessment of learning style, right/left brain dominance, and background interviews concerning language experiences. The third section discusses instruction based on the assessed strengths and weaknesses of the students, specifically developing inference skills, maintaining the conventions of writing, and understanding the writing process. The fourth section focuses on evaluation of student writing and using evaluation scales and peer review, and the last section explores the role of the developmental course in preparing students to meet the expectations of mainstream courses. (HTH)

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THE TEACHING AND EVALUATION OF COMPOSITION: DEVELOPMENTAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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THE TEACHING AND EVALUATION OF COMPOSITION: DEVELOPMENTAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

Who Are Basic Skills Writers?

"A reproach to be wiped away": these words were used in the 1872 issue of the **Vassar Miscellany** to describe basic skills classes on campus. Today basic skills are not explicitly referred to as a reproach to our educational system, but a similar implication can be drawn from the recommendations of the NIE - sponsored post-secondary study group (October 1984). The group recommends that remediation be maintained on campus--at least until educational reform takes effect. The recommendation certainly implies that basic skills classes on postsecondary campuses are a sign of American's educational weakness, a reason for reform. A further implication is that all students can be taught basic skills in elementary school. Not much consideration seems to be given to the physical, mental and emotional readiness of the student. In order to plan an effective course of writing instruction for these students, an instructor must first deal with the public's attitude toward the students and the students' attitudes toward themselves. Instructors must ask: What does it mean when a student must take basic skills classes and is labeled developmental? What are his/her special needs as a learner?

Drawing a profile a developmental student isn't easy. By definition the student has weak basic skills. The definition of weak, of course, varies depending on the standards established by an institution. The reasons for the weakness also vary. The student does not necessarily have low ability. The student may have had undiagnosed hearing, sight or emotional problems,

or have matured slowly. As early as the 1970s, Mina Shaughnessy drew our attention to at least two characteristics of developmental students that affect their ability to learn: the students tend to have weak self-images and are extrinsically motivated. Kurt Lauridsen, in a five-year-study at Berkeley that was concluded in 1979 found that dealing with such affective factors was important in the success of developmental students. We need to keep Lauridsen's research in mind when we think about the best way to teach basic skills writers. We must meet their emotional needs to be successful in creating an environment where they can improve their learning skills.

Pretesting for Language Skills

Pretesting should reflect an instructor's interest in not only the student's entering language skills and desired exit skills but also his/her affective needs. The following are several factors to be considered in planning the pretest essay or paragraphs:

1) If the pretest parallels the posttest for the course, the pretest can be used later for pre-post test comparisons.
2) If an instructor wants to create a controlled test situation, he/she should not expect to see a student's best writing. Sanders and Littlefield (1975) found that students produce their best writing when they are given a topic in advance to think about and when they have flexible time constraints for writing. In other words, instructors should inform students that their best writing is produced through thoughtful revision of multiple drafts, and they will do that kind of

writing later even though the pretest is designed to assess the type of draft that they can produce in an hour, a typical, artifical constraint imposed by class times.

3) For the pretest the instructor should select a familiar audience and speaker and topic(s) students will feel competent to discuss. Daly and Hailey in a 1984 study of anxiety noted that situational anxiety is dependent on the particular characteristics of a writing situation. In particular, high evaluation, conspicuousness, ambiguity, novelty and a history of poor experiences with writing are significant factors. Since research in other fields has indicated that only moderate amounts of anxiety enhance performance, the instructor should ease students' anxiety by allowing them to write on pretest topics that are near to them with themselves as speaker and the teacher as audience so the task does not seem novel. The students should also be told in advance that their papers will be discussed in a private conference and not graded, so that they need not worry about evaluation or exposure to peers as weak writers. The initial writing sample should simply be used for diagnosis with no particular expectations on the part of the instructor or student.

On the other hand, during the course of instruction students need to grow more comfortable with factors such as evaluation and novelty. They need to have their writings read and evaluated by peers, they need to become aware of non-teacher audience needs, and they even need to become

comfortable about discussing and writing about a number of unfamiliar topics, but all of that should come slowly with instruction. Collins and Williamson (1984) found that asking weak writers to attend to complex rhetorical tasks led writers to produce inexplicit writing: in other words, they wrote as if they were sharing their half of a dialogue. Collins and Williamson stated: "Our argument that weaker writers resort to spoken dialogue, or depend on speaking while writing, means only that at times conversational features show up inappropriately in writing, and these times are more frequent in weak than strong writing....We suspect that the causes of writing problems reside neither in cognitive nor in linguistic deficits, but in difficulties particular writers have with particular writing tasks." (p. 293) In order to evaluate the difficulty of a new writing task, instructors should give each new task a test run in the Learning Assistance Center to be certain that the task is appropriate for a basic skills student.

4) In regard to administration of the pretest essay, an instructor should give the topics orally and in written form. In the reading program at Louisiana State University 4,000 developmental students were screened for vision problems, and approximately 1/4 required further sight testing and help from an optometrist or opthamologist: poor performance sometimes is in part the result of a student's difficulty in seeing the blackboard or reading directions on a printed page, so oral directions are

important to valid testing, at least until vision testing has taken place.

5) Evaluation of the pretest must be linked to the exit critera specified for the course at a particular institution. In discussing the pretest the instructor must be careful to point out strengths as well as weaknesses of the writer. To reach exit requirements, the student should set some short-range goals of the sort that Glasser recommends for reality therapy. The initial goal should be seemingly within the student's ability to correct relatively easily, perhaps an editing concern, so that he/she gains confidence. The goals, of course, become more global as the course progresses. Most importantly, the student must express commitment to the goal and plan a strategy for reaching the goal.

Pretesting for Affective Needs

In addition to a pretest essay to assess basic language skills, other test data can be useful in assessing and meeting affective needs:

1. The Daly-Miller Test of Writing Apprehension is a good pretest of the student's disposition toward writing. Because basic skills writers have for years been labeled as poor writers, they are sometimes initially anxious or defensive about their writing ability.
2. In addition to the Daly-Miller Test of Writing Apprehension, the instructor can gather affective information by administering a learning style inventory and discussing right/left brain research with the student. Many learning

style tests are available, but one that is particularly appealing is a computerized test by **Educational Activities, inc.** that is based on Dunn's inventory. The printout not only identifies and explains the learning style of the student but also offers a prescription for instruction and allows the instructor to compare the individual student's learning style to that of the rest of the class or the instructor's learning style to that of the class. The test may be given on the computer and evaluated by the computer so the testing requires little of an instructor's time. A paper and pencil version of the test is also available for instructors who wish to administer the test in the classroom.

Learning styles indicate a student's preference, but the instructor must discuss the student's learning style with the student so that the student learns that he/she can and must learn to be flexible, despite his/her preferences. For example, if the student prefers individual work on a project but group work is taking place, he/she should be aware why he/she is not perhaps enjoying the class but make an effort to be flexible. If instruction does not suit his/her preference for long periods of time, the student can learn to control the environment. For example, if a student had difficulty attending to a lecture, he/she can arrange for a small group discussion with peers after class. These are preferable alternatives to simply not attending class.

3) A third relevent type of testing is in the area of right/left brain dominance. Though Bernice MacCarthy has a test available through her 4-Mat system, formal testing is usually not necessary. Each student simply needs to be aware of his/her right/left brain tendency as an aid in uncovering the reasons learning may have been difficult in the past.

To diagnose any tendency for right/left brain dominance, I ask students questions such as whether they are strongly left handed (right handed) or right handed (left brained) or can use either hand equally well. I ask how they solve problems or give them a task such as looking for the rule in solving a word puzzle. If they solve problems systematically or in an unstructured way that is also a clue to whether or not they are left/right brained. Other clues to dominance are also observable:

Characteristics of Left-Mode Dominance	Characteristics of Right-Mode Dominance
-Intellectual	-Intuitive
-Analytic (good at algebra)	-Synthesizing (good at geometry)
-Verbal (good at languages)	-Visuo-spatial (good at driving)
-Structure & sequential in approaching problems	-Unstructured and openended in approaching problems

Students need to realize that both types of processing are valuable but that school is a left-brained world. As a result, those who tend to be right brained have a rational for being bright but not in the form that makes scholarly achievement most accessible. Students need confidence to become achievers.

Most importantly, right/left brain research is useful in convincing students that they can improve their spelling. Male students, in particular, are sometimes convinced that they always have been, and always will be, poor spellers. However, research indicates otherwise. Reading and spelling in the elementary stages are dependent on discrimination of letters, a left-brained activity. (Sally Springer and George Deutsch, 1981, p. 160). In elementary school males are disadvantaged in this activity because the male hormone is linked to slow growth of the left side of the brain. (**Newsweek**, August 30, 1982, p. 63). The problem is a developmental one that normal males outgrow. Unfortunately, they often do not outgrow the conception of themselves as poor spellers, something that becomes a self-fulfulling prophecy. During discussions with students, instructors should make the research a concrete reality by showing the students pre- and posttest essays written by students who once considered themselves hopeless spellers until they understood the origin of their problem and began to look closely at words.

4) The above data should be discussed with a student in a private conference. At that time the instructor should also ask a few interview questions regarding the student's background:

a) The native language spoken in the student's home
b) Student's study of foreign language
c) The amount of writing and type of feedback given in previous English classes
d) Early experiences with reading and writing

The early language experiences of many of the basic writers have placed them at a disadvantage in school. Lee Golda has written a recent article that summarizes the relation between reading and writing in young children. She noted students need early home models: reading influences spelling, vocabulary, editing skills and general writing skills. The instructor should explain to students that according to Noam Chomsky they have developed a grammar by the age of 4. Students need to be aware that for fifteen years they practiced linguistic rules that because of their environment, they didn't learn quite right. They can't expect to relearn those language rules easily. Their expectations must be for a gradual change in their language skills.

If the instructor once struggled to change his/her own language skills, the students should be told. They will not only appreciate the instructor's empathy but feel confident that he/she knows the way to become a successful student. On the other hand, if the instructor came from a Phi Beta Kappa set of parents, students need someone else, perhaps an upperclassman as a model. Former students who drop by class or LAC tutors can give great testimonials. Students need role models and encouragement.

Instruction

The pretesting and early evaluative conference suggested are meant to make clear to the student and instructor the weakness and strengths of the student's language skills, the origin of

those skills, and a personal plan for strengthening the skills. The instructor's teaching strategies should also be shared so they can become the student's learning strategies.

Several recent research studies offer guidance regarding the instruction necessary in producing basic composition competencies. First, the ability to sort facts from opinion and draw inferences is important to the development of basic writers. They need to sharpen their problem-solving and reasoning skills by drawing inferences and then checking the validity of those inferences. The following is a sample situation: Susie comes home from school. She is an Eagle in reading class and her sister is a bluebird. What can be inferred? Some students infer that Susie's sister is a dumb, but supposedly happy bluebird. They usually empathize with Susie's sister. Students have a chance to talk about the unfairness of such labels and the fact that even if abilities are accurately assessed, they change. They need to look at problems in a global, dynamic way.

Studies of the writing abilities of college freshman support the need for improved abilities to draw inferences. In a study conducted at SUNY at Buffalo by Charles Cooper, students drew false assumptions that were not derivable from the writing task. (p. 44) Cooper noted that "facts were generally carelessly observed, by students given a high holistic quality score(...) as well as those listed average (...) and low...." (p.44) They seemed inclined to observe only that which is most obvious, and which conforms to their preconceived notions. (pp. 44-45)

Beach and Eaton found in a recent study of factors influencing self-assessing and revising by college freshmen that students often inferred what they wanted a section to say rather than what it actually said (1984). Sommers also found (1978 & 1980) that students have difficulties in defining problems at the level of an overall darft: They made vague, global inferences that don't help in dealing with specific parts. In particular, in the Beach and Eaton study, students could only revise in areas with which they were familiar. For the students in the study the familiar areas were conventions regarding evidence or support. Basic writers are particularly disadvantaged in this regard. Shaughnessy (1977) found basic writers are unfamiliar with even the common conventions used in formal, academic writing.

In beginning to assist basic writers who have difficulty in maintaining the conventions of formal writing, computers can be helpful. In addition to having handwriting difficulties, many students cannot maintain a margin or indent regularly for paragraphs. Word processing solves such problems.

Computers are also helpful in other ways. In one study at LaGuardia Community College last year, Marian Arken and Brian Gallagher had success in teaching two developmental composition courses, one of which included LD students, using microcomputers. The course was meant particularly to assist students with dyslexia. The act of handwriting involves transfer of information from one brain hemisphere to the other, a difficult task

for a dyslexic. The result of the small study was that eleven students who had failed the course passed the next course in the composition sequence. The course had a ripple effect; for example, one bright but dyslexic student went from an F in basic writing and a .8 index to an A in basic writing and a 3.54 index.

In regard to matters of invention, Lillian Bridwell has been developing software that can offer students a variety of prewriting options. Such software could meet individual preferences. Generally right-brained people prefer an unstructured approach to problem solving, such as free writing; whereas, people who are more left-brained prefer a structured approach such as the tagmemic heuristic procedure.

After prewriting, the instructor must caution the students that writing is a recursive process without distinct sequential steps, and they must not be preoccupied with editing. Each student needs short-range, realistic editing goals. Muriel Harris, editor of the Writing Lab Newsletter, suggests that the instructor and student locate the "biggest" error, then a second reading for the next type of error (p. 68). She points out that many students do not realize they can't work on all their problems at once. Furthermore, the first error to be conquered should be one that can be corrected fairly easily so the student has an early, successful experience. Sandra Perl, observing unskilled writers, noted that one of their characteristics was the frequency with which they stop to edit as they write, and Mike Rose, in his research of blocked writers, lists

premature editing as a habit of some high blockers.

When students are finally ready to edit, ueful editing strategies include reading a line backward to check spelling--without reading for meaning. Reading clauses from the end of the paper backward helps a student who is prone to writing fragments. Sentence combining, in particular is useful in improving the editing skill of basic writers.

Daiute's research supports this claim: Students write clauses using their short-term memory. Therefore, she found that predictable errors in style and syntax resulted when students wrote sentences that were longer than average. Better writers have a memorized repertoire of sentence patterns and, therefore, do not take up their short-term memory with such concerns. Sentence combining can help <u>all</u> students to develop such a repertoire. An instructional implication of the study is also that poor writers may become less dependent on frequent rereading while drafting, a trait identified by M. Atwell in a 1980 dissertation.

Most of all, students must be encouraged to learn how to write by reading, writing and speaking. A side benefit of the widely advocated interaction of the related language mode is that a varied mixture of instruction in all the language skills prevents brain death, or terminal boredom, the worst enemy of all earnest basic composition instructors.

<u>Evaluation</u>

Regarding day-to-day evaluation of papers, evaluative scales should be tailored to assignments and used by the teacher, the

student and a peer reader. When students protest they want only the instructor to see their papers, they need to be reminded that the instructor is not the only person in the room who thinks. If an M.D. told them to have a serious operation, they would want a second opinion: Ph.D's are also fallible. Their minds sometimes wander while reading and miss an important point. Peter Elbow's suggestions for peer response in the teacherless writing class teach students how to respond usefully and ease the protests. The response process also sharpens their thinking skills and requires them to communicate.

At monthly intervals students need to be able to see quantifiable progress -- longer papers, fewer editing errors, better organization and general comments on content. Keeping a notebook is essential to checking progress. Whenever possible, the progress should be recorded by means of criterion, rather than norm-referenced evaluation: developmental students have spent too many years on the wrong side of a bell-shaped curve. They are motivated by the concept of mastery learning; everyone in the class can be a success if specified standards are met. Setting clear standards of the sort is also compatible with the recommendations of the NIE-sponsored study group concerned with academic excellence on the postsecondary level.

The Prognosis

"What happens when I leave your class?" That is the question many students ask when the end of the semester nears. They wonder if their progress is real. To ease those self-defeating fears, the

developmental instructor should reassure the student of the frequent communication between the instructors of mainstream courses and basic skills courses. Preparing students to meet the expectations of the mainstream professors means that the basic composition instructor should determine as clearly as possible the kinds of tasks required in the mainstream courses and teach the basics of those tasks whatever they may be. For example, Bridwell and Dunn (1980) have criticized the sterile writing that often results when inexperienced writers try to write a 500-word essay complete with thesis. (p. 4) Nevertheless, in many institutions the five-hundred word essay is required of mainstream composition students, so the instructor of developmental students should be prepared to teach the traditional essay form before the students exit from the class. When teaching the essay, an instructor can teach the formula but explain that professional writers deviate from the formula. Later in the semester, to develop thinking skills, students can infer topic sentences and thesis sentences in professional writings where they are unstated.

Finally, basic writing instructors should maintain an open door policy for students who want to return for advice, assistance or (best of all) praise for success in the mainstream composition class.

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